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BLM - ALASKA

FRONTIERS

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Iditarod time—we've got everything but the snow!

This past winter was a warm one for parts of Alaska. It's rarely a problem, except when it's time for the Iditarod Sled Dog Race. The dogs need cooler weather to run without overheating, and snow to pull the sleds. Once again, however, key people involved in the race put in long "last minute" hours and made it happen.

Stretching from Seward to Nome, the Iditarod National Historic Trail (INHT) differs from the race trail. Congress designated the INHT as being a significant historic transportation route.

BLM coordinates the trail system, which crosses Native corporation, State and Federal lands. Involved parties follow a comprehensive management plan that emphasizes the preservation, use and enjoyment of the trail system.

The Iditarod Trail is the site of four major competitive events each winter: the Iditarod Sled Dog Mushing Race, the Gold Rush Classic snowmachine race, the Iditabike mountain bike race, and the Iditasport human endurance race—a combination event involving skiing, running and mountain biking. BLM evaluates possible environmental effects of each event, issues permits, and checks compliance during and afterwards.

Mushers used the Bureau of Land Management's Campbell Tract Facility as a staging area during this year's Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race.

It's Iditarod time — Campbell Tract goes to the dogs!

Our canine athletes chow down after a romp through Anchorage. (Photos by Ed Bovy)

When BLM's Iditarod Trail coordinator Mike Zaidlicz went to the annual press briefing at the Regal Alaskan Hotel in February like he always does, he figured the 29th running of the Iditarod Sled Dog Mushing Race would be no different. Everything was in place like it always is—supplies, checkpoints, veterinarians and hundreds of volunteers—while media and the public were gathering in Anchorage for the start of Alaska's biggest event.

But this year was different. It had been one of the warmest winters on record in the Anchorage bowl, with snowfall far below normal and no subzero temperatures. Iditarod Executive Director Stan Hooley spotted Zaidlicz at the Regal Hotel and told him trail conditions were too icy for the mushers to travel safely to the traditional drop-off point at Eagle River. There was no way they could use their sled brakes or snow hooks to maneuver safely on what was left of the trail. The dogs and the mushers would be at risk, not to mention VIPs—"Iditariders" who had donated big bucks to support the race and ride with mushers down the trail.

The Iditarod organizers wanted to play it safe and shorten the ceremonial start, but was there a place in Anchorage with sufficient size to handle 69 mushers, more than 600 handlers, over 100 support vehicles, and some 80 VIPs, not to mention more than 1,000 excited race dogs? Why Campbell Tract, of course!

Zaidlicz was on the spot; the race was starting in less than 72 hours! Could BLM pitch in at the last minute and make it happen?

Zaidlicz called Anchorage Field Office acting manager Peter Ditton to talk it over. "There was no conflict with our mission and it looked like we could help, so we said yes," says Ditton. That afternoon Zaidlicz met with Iditarod race manager Jack Niggemyer, start coordinator Rick Calcote, and checkpoint coordinator Swerv Petty to see what was needed to make the last-minute shift.

The next day, the group, along with Campbell Tract maintenance supervisor Ned Darling, met at the tract facility to plan the details. "We discussed parking, traffic control, and how and where to park vehicles so locations could be rotated," says Darling. He enlisted Bobby Johnson and Darryl Coates for the biggest job, clearing a winter's worth of snowpiles from the ramp area behind the office complex. Other logistics involved providing power hookups to two motor-homes to be used as temporary offices.

Race day dawned clear and cold, a perfect day for running dogs. Fresh white snow and blue skies greeted the few hearty spectators that walked in to see the mushers up close.

The race operates on a staggered starting procedure, launching teams at two-minute intervals, so the first teams began arriving around noon. A small convoy of vehicles was choreographed to Iditarod precision by checkpoint volunteers. As the early arrivals departed, other vehicles arrived and were directed to their designated parking spots. BLM ranger Dave Stimson coordinated secu-

ED BOVY

It takes a lot of dedicated volunteers each year to make the Iditarod a success, including people to show the mushers and dogs the way to the race trail.

ED BOVY

The warehouse parking lot at the Campbell Tract Facility served as a staging area (above). By 5 p.m., only a few stray pieces of straw served as reminders of this year's Iditarod Sled Dog Race (below).

ED BOVY

rity with Anchorage Police officers and volunteer security staff.

By one p.m. the offices and warehouse were surrounded by hundreds of tired but happy dogs, excited to be out on the first leg of their annual great adventure. Well-known mushers and champions, such as Rick Swenson, Doug Swingley, Martin Buser, DeeDee Jonrowe and Jeff King, plus some new challengers, were elbow-to-elbow caring for their dogs in rows of neatly parked trucks. You could say it was a real "dog-day afternoon."

It also provided a perfect opportunity for BLM State Director Fran Cherry to show off the Campbell Tract to some VIPs from Washington, D.C.: Henri Bisson, Assistant Director for Resources and Planning; Elaine Marquis-Brong, Director of the Office of the National Landscape Conservation System; and recreation planner Bob Ratcliffe.

Meanwhile, Iditarod courtesy vans shuttled the Iditariders back to their hotels. "By 5 p.m. everything was gone but the portable outhouses," says Zaidlicz.

Darling agrees. "I was surprised just how little impact there was. You could hardly tell nearly 2,000 people had paid us a visit over the weekend."

When BLMers arrived for work on Monday morning, few realized their parking lot had played a small but important role in this year's race.

Will the Iditarod return to the Campbell Tract next year? Probably not. Eagle River will remain the primary choice for concluding the ceremonial start, but then again, if there's anything to this global warming theory, the Campbell Tract may get another chance to help the race in the seasons ahead.

—Ed Bovy

More than a shelter

Mushers and locals swap stories at shelter cabins along the Iditarod

BLM'S SHELTER CABINS ALONG the Iditarod National Historic Trail offer quiet solitude to many a weary traveler seeking rest and a place to escape the windswept trail. But all this changes each March when the four rustic cabins become a hub of activity for mushers, reporters, and locals during the Iditarod Sled Dog Race.

BLM rangers prepare the cabins for heavy use during high-profile events such as the race, and they provide a presence throughout the event. During this year's Iditarod, rangers Dave Stimson and Rohn Nelson spent seven days at Old Woman Cabin, 40 miles outside Unalakleet. The two men kept the cabin heated and ready for use by mushers and other visitors.

The rangers also talked with local teens about snowmachine safety and helped one young four-wheeler who ventured into deep snow and became stuck on the trail near the cabin, temporarily blocking the trail. They also worked with local law enforcement throughout the race to keep the trail safe for all users.

Stimson says the week-long assignment at Old Woman Cabin began quietly, as lead musher Doug Swingley breezed by without a rest stop. A few hours later, Jeff King arrived at Old Woman for a four-hour rest. King was interviewed on the front porch of the cabin by reporters from the ABC television affiliate in Anchorage and by the USA Network. During the next few days, dozens of other mushers would also stop by Old Woman to rest, feed their dogs, and talk with reporters.

Stimson and Nelson enjoyed getting to know some of the mushers. Stimson declares Charlie Boulding the "most entertaining" musher, followed by Martin Buser. Stimson adds, "One evening Buser and Boulding were both lamenting their positions in the race and their anticipated small winnings. While discussing their bleak financial future, Buser said, 'We may have to get jobs!'"

ED BOV

Old Woman Cabin, located 40 miles outside Unalakleet, provides a welcome shelter for weary Iditarod dog mushers.

March 12 and 13 would prove to be the busiest days at Old Woman. Some mushers fed their dogs and left, but about half stopped for an extended rest at the cabin. "At one point, we had seventeen people jammed into the cabin," Stimson says. "All horizontal space, including the floor, was taken by exhausted mushers. The odor of mushers' clothing drying in front of the wood stove became overwhelming, while the front yard was filled with dog teams barking and yapping at each other."

When most of the mushers were finally on their way to Unalakleet and then on to Nome, the two BLM rangers cleaned up the cabin, replenished firewood, bagged trash, and set out for Unalakleet. After a closeout meeting with the local village corporation, the two cleaned and shipped their gear and equipment, and boarded a flight back to Anchorage.

Most of us just watch the Iditarod on the news, but a few lucky employees and locals got to swap stories with the mushers around a wood stove in a small cabin along the trail. Maybe that's the real value of shelter cabins like Old Woman, in a state as vast as Alaska.

—Teresa McPherson

Iditarod Trail notes

The original surveyed mail route from Seward to Nome was 938 miles. The Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race uses two alternate routes from Anchorage to Nome, both longer than the historic route (about 1,100 miles from Anchorage to Nome). The total mileage for the historic trail system, including side and connecting trails, is about 2,400 miles.

One of the best places to view the Iditarod National Historic Trail is at its beginning in Seward. A paved bike path near Seward's small boat harbor follows the first couple of miles of the trail.

Since the Iditarod Trail is primarily a winter trail, opportunities for summer hiking are limited. The first several miles of the trail north of Seward can be hiked during the summer as well as approximately 30 miles from Girdwood to Eagle River. Visitors to Nome can hike east along the trail near the Bering Sea coast for approximately 30 miles.

Depending on the part of the trail and the season, you can expect to see moose, caribou, brown bear, bison, wolf, Dall sheep and many species of birds and smaller mammals. Near the Bering Sea coast you may see seals, walrus and occasionally a polar bear; be aware that all are wild animals and may become hostile if they feel threatened.

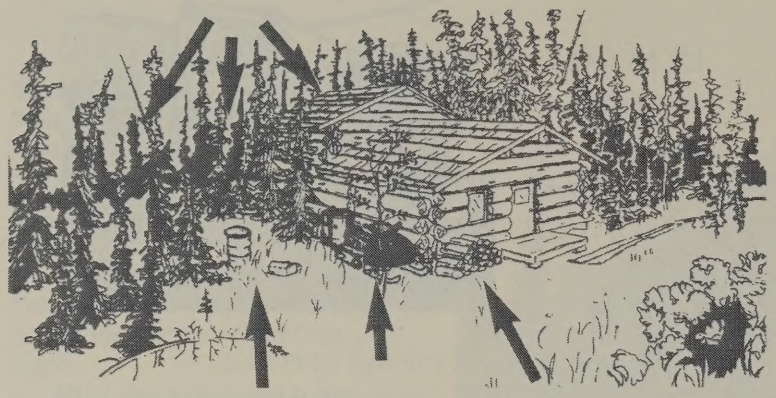
BLM suspends recent 3809 regs for more public review

BLM has proposed to suspend its recently adopted 3809 surface management regulations concerning hardrock mining operations on public lands, and set a 45 day public comment period. If the proposal to suspend the newly adopted regulations (effective January 20, 2001) is adopted as a final rule, it will suspend these regulations, and reinstate the regulations that were in place on January 19, 2001.

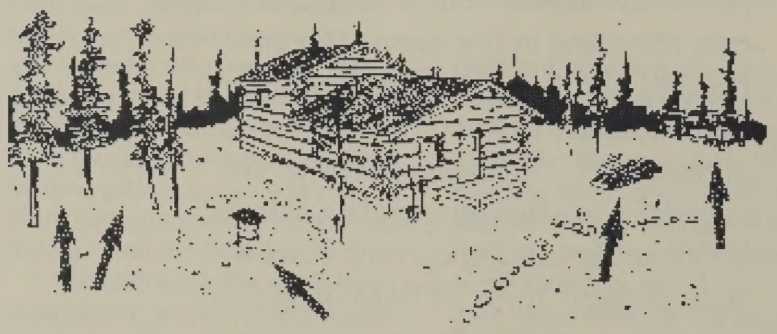
The proposal allows BLM to review public comments before issuing a final rule, resulting in the agency (1) suspending the current rules completely and reinstating the former rules, as is proposed; (2) retaining parts of the current rule while suspending others; or (3) retaining the current rules in their present form. If BLM does suspend the current rule, in whole or in part, a new rule will supersede it at that time. The current rule will continue in effect until a final rule is published, possibly in July. Copies of the 3809 proposal can be obtained from any BLM State Office or accessed from BLM's national web site (www.blm.gov) or the Federal Register site (www.access.gpo.gov).

Protect your property from wildland fires ... now!

FireWise program to reduce wildfires and benefit ecosystems



A defensible space is the only protection a remote site may have against a wildfire. Fire easily travels up trees, along overhanging branches to rooftops, or it can move quickly through dry shrubs and grass, and ignite firewood or machinery stored against Structure. . Work with your neighbors to clear electrical power lines and common areas between houses. Locate and label liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) tanks and any fuel storage containers at least 30 feet from a structure. Use stone or iron, instead of wood, for cribs under tanks. If you store gas, please label it.



The principles of defensible space were applied to this cabin and surrounding area. Clear roughly 30 feet surrounding your property area of trees, shrubs and tall grasses that could carry a fire to your building. Remove dead, weak or diseased trees, leaving a healthy mixture of older and younger trees. Move firewood, gas or diesel fuel cans, propane tanks, cars, trucks, four-wheelers and snowmachines at least 100 feet from your home. Identify any on-site water sources so they can be used. Choose metal roofing, asphalt shingles or other nonburnable material that can help reduce the chances of your roof catching fire from drifting sparks. Wet down your roof during dangerously dry times to reduce the risk of fire.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The old saying holds true in spades for fire. It's far easier—and less traumatic—to prevent fires rather than put them out.

Today, fire prevention isn't as simple as Smokey Bear's advice: "Only you can prevent forest fires." Wildland fires are now recognized as part a healthy ecosystem, but people living near wildlands need to learn how to protect themselves and their property from the danger of fires. More Alaskans live in the boreal forest, which is especially prone to fires. Every year, lightning starts hundreds of fires that race over thousands of acres, across tundra and black spruce forests, but the worst fires are caused by humans and they usually pose the greatest hazard to human values.

Five years ago, the Miller's Reach fire destroyed more than 450 residential structures near Big Lake. A recent study identified 38 other Alaska communities at risk. A fire like Miller's Reach can quickly overwhelm the strongest fire suppression efforts. Fortunately, suppression is not the only protection we have from wildfire.

A national FireWise program, designed to promote fire safety where wildland and urban areas meet, has been adapted to Alaska as a fire prevention model. FireWise program materials were developed through the Alaska Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (AWFCG)—federal and state agencies involved in land and fire management—and Alaska Native groups. Brochures outline steps to adopt FireWise techniques, plus building and remodeling tips to increase your home's resistance to fire.

FireWise stresses creating a defensible space around your house. Flammable materials should be moved at least 100 feet away. Plant only fire-resistant plants and shrubs within 30 feet of structures.

Use screens to cover openings and

recesses. Roofs, gutters, and other areas around the house collect leaves, needles, and other woody debris. These areas must be cleared several times during the spring, summer and fall. Burning embers will be carried to the same areas and can easily ignite fine, dry fuels. Properly dispose of all cut vegetation by an approved method. Open burning may require a burning permit. Contact your nearest fire agency or department, or Village Public safety Officer for local requirements.

If your house is set back from the street, road or trail, post your address or name at the entrance of your driveway. Precious time can be lost if firefighters have difficulty finding or accessing your house. Make sure your street name and address are at least four inches tall, on a contrasting color background, and made of fire resistant materials. They should be visible from all directions of travel for at least 150 feet.

Narrow roads, dead-end streets, steep driveways and weak bridges can delay firefighters, or prevent them from arriving at all. Remember, fire fighting equipment is much larger and heavier than your family car or truck.

FireWise information include a rating sheet to help you and your neighbors assess your homes for fire dangers. A video narrated by former Alaska Governor Jay Hammond is also included in the materials.

The AWFCG and the Kenai Peninsula Borough held a FireWise workshop April 25-27 in Kenai. About 100 fire professionals and planners, plus architects, builders, homeowners, insurance representatives, emergency managers and local government officials discussed examples of successful efforts to incorporate FireWise concepts into community planning, and practiced strategies for protecting homes and communities from wildland fires.

FireWise planning goes beyond individual homeowners; community development plans should provide adequate access and road standards, water and electrical supplies, and an emergency water supply.

Fire doesn't respect property boundaries. Prevention, planning and preparation can substantially reduce the risks.

—Andy Williams

Congress funds new FireWise program

In response to last year's devastating fires, Congress appropriated $240 million to fund a new FireWise program, meant to reduce the threat of wildfires. In Alaska, 38 communities were considered eligible for the new program, although sites may change as federal agencies receive more information and selective criteria are applied.

This year's agenda includes restoring and rehabilitating areas damaged by last year's wildfires, ensuring federal firefighting forces are prepared for future wildfire seasons, and coordinating rural firefighting efforts. A copy of the January 4, 2001 Federal Register notice and a list of selected at-risk communities are available on the National Interagency Fire Center's (NIFC) web site at: www.nifc.gov.

States, tribal organizations and local governments gave a list of communities at-risk to wildfires to the Departments of Interior (DOI) and Agriculture (USDA). Federal land management agencies worked with the Western Governors' Association, the National Association of State Foresters, and others to define and identify "at-risk" criteria, especially in what fire officials call the "urban wildland interface"—areas near public lands managed by BLM, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In Alaska, more than 400 human-caused wildfires are reported in an average year, with most occurring in May and early June before new growth has replaced dry, dead vegetation from the previous year. Human-caused fires can be more destructive than lightning-caused fires since they occur in inhabited areas.

Pipeline owner companies apply for Right-of-Way

The Bureau of Land Management and the Alaska Department of Natural Resources (ADNR) have received applications to renew the Trans-Alaska Pipeline System (TAPS) right-of-way authorizations.

BLM and the ADNR entered into right-of-way authorizations with TAPS owners for 30 years. The current right-of-way expires in January of 2004.

The Federal-State Renewal Team will initially review the applications, which may take up to 90 days.

The TAPS renewal processes will include a review of compliance with Federal and State laws and regulations, and the terms of the State lease and Federal grant by their holders. Formal notice of these applications as well as other required notices will be in accordance with the appropriate and statutory and regulatory requirements.

General information, public participation announcements, and updates will be available on the Federal-State TAPS renewal web site: http://www.tapsrenewal.jpo.doi.gov

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